


Advancing democracy on-line?

An examination of non-profits and the Internet.

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strength of a democracy

- **ability for citizens to organize**
 - **levels of exposure to alternative positions**
 - **input with decision making processes**
 - **range of common experiences citizens share**
(Sunstein, 2001)
 - **strength of (Habermas') public sphere**
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- The bottom right of the slide features several decorative concentric circles in a lighter blue shade, resembling ripples in water. There are three main sets of these circles, with the largest one on the right and two smaller ones to its left.

Habermas' public sphere

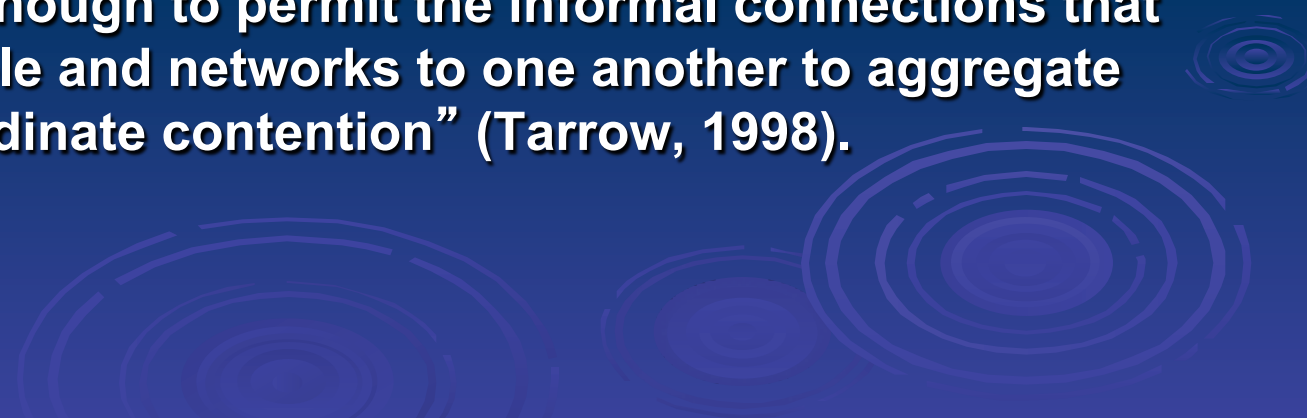
- autonomy from state and corporate power
 - exchange & critique of criticizable validity claims
 - reflexivity
 - examine personal & social interests
 - ideal role taking
 - attempt to understand other perspectives
 - sincerity of information
 - intent, interests, needs, etc
 - discursive inclusion and equality
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- A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner of the slide, consisting of several concentric circles of varying shades of blue and purple, resembling ripples in water or a stylized sunburst.

internet as savior?

predictions:

- **sweeping improvements in democratic participation**
(Bertelson, 1992)
- **citizens can fully participate in democratic process**

Organizational model must be “sufficiently robust to structure sustained relations with opponents, but flexible enough to permit the informal connections that link people and networks to one another to aggregate and coordinate contention” (Tarrow, 1998).

The background of the slide features several faint, concentric circles in a lighter shade of blue, resembling ripples in water. These circles are positioned in the lower half of the slide, with one large set on the right and two smaller ones on the left.

internet benefits

- **no central control point** (Berman & Weitzner, 1997)
- **users can produce, receive and distribute information almost instantaneously** (Fisher, et al., 1996, Lunenefeld, 1999)
- **access to information, grass roots organization and the opportunity to provide feedback to government** (Bacard, 1993)
- **horizontal and vertical flow of communication** (Stromer-Galley, 2000)
- **physical connectivity, data communality, interactivity, and ease of use** (Flanagin et al., 2000)
- **direct participation** (Bertelson, 1992)

the reality

- **dramatic shifts in democracy and social change have not followed**
- **voting has dropped to a sixty year low**
(Pew Research Center, 1998)
- **no citizen initiatives at national level** (Becker, 2001)
- **rapid commercialization & increasing corporate control of Internet infrastructure**
(McChesney, 1999; Schiller, 1999)
- **new democratic processes have not been made**
(Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Diani, 2000)

the critical research

- **centered on questions of general access**
(Katzman, 1974; National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999)
- **content corporatization**
(Habermas, 1989; McChesney, 2000)
- **universal usage patterns**
(Leonhirth, Mindich, & Straumanis, 1997; Streck, 1998)

The preponderance of scholarly investigation continues to suggest that the Internet remains a strong democratizing tool because of its inherent interactive capabilities *alone*.

(Coombs, 1998; Flowers, 1995; Kapor, 1994; Mitra, 1997)

the activist accord:

- the presumption that the Internet has brought politically disenfranchised individuals together with citizen movements and allowed conflicting organizations to exchange ideas

the big question(s)

- How do non-profits/citizens/activists navigate, employ this technology to create a new democratic sphere?
- How do individuals organize/navigate?
- What types of information is transferred between groups?
- Why do users essentially engage the technology?
- Is new media activism affective in creating social change?
- Is the Internet democratic?

...What's going on?

overall research plan

- **step 1:**
focus group meetings (3 cities)
- **step 2:**
surveys of non-profit citizen organizations (3,000) & activists (up to 5 per organization)
- **step 3:**
content analysis of non-profit websites

the focus groups

- austin, texas (3)
 - san francisco, california (2)
 - new york, new york (2)
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- 5-15 people per meeting
 - email invite to non-profits listed in 'national non-profit associations'

the focus groups

- tech by default
- corporate model works...and should be followed
- credibility by consistent presence alone
- technology not incorporated into mission
- unable to locate value
- more plans than execution
- no training
- purpose of technology is to disseminate info
- websites remain one way level of communication
- devaluation of technology by outside forces

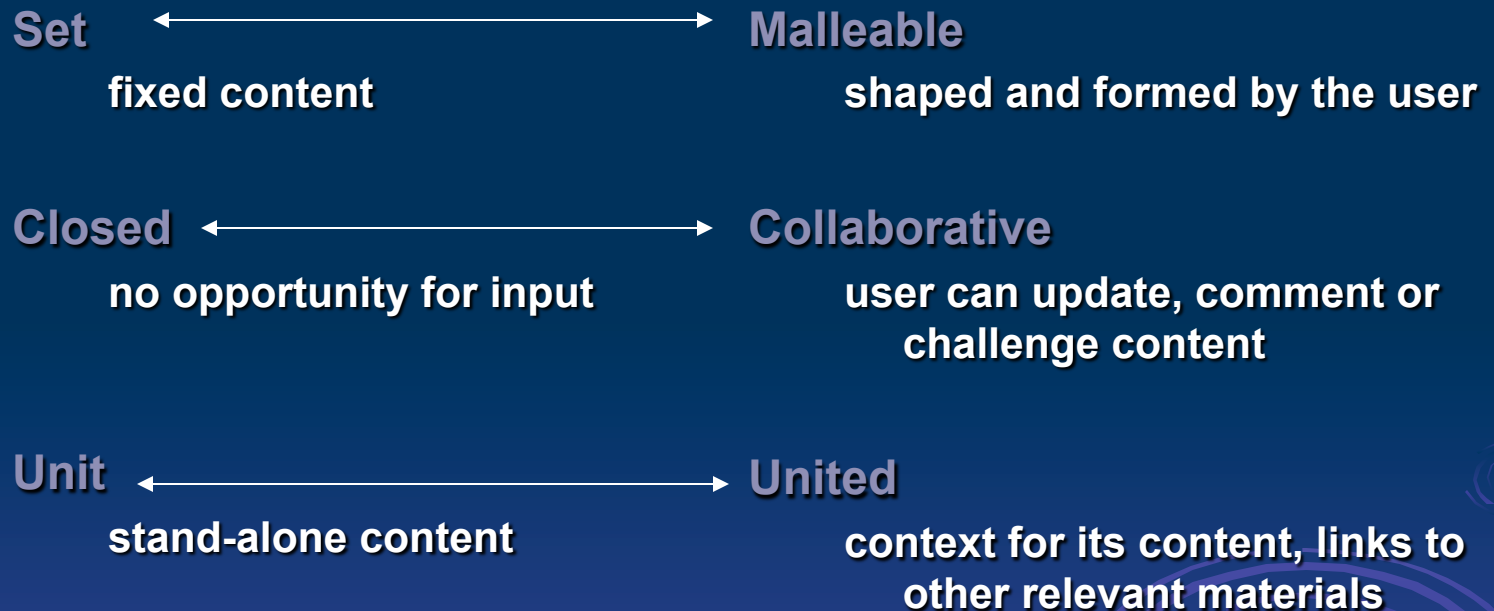
the survey

<http://giaSurvey.cla.umn.edu/>



the content analysis

Coding Paul & Fiebich (Elements of Storytelling) for democracy
Likert Scales



the content analysis

Coding Habermas (public sphere) for democracy

(Dahlberg, 2001)

Criteria

*autonomy from state & corporate
power*

discussion boards

*exchange & critique of criticizable
validity claims*

reflexivity

ideal role taking

sincerity of information

discursive inclusion & equality

Coding

**evidence of corporate sponsorship
(advertisements, corporate endowments, etc.)**

**existence of discussion boards moderated/
managed by a facilitator**

**existence of statements by facilitator encouraging
respect of difference and/or possible censure if
'rules' are broken**

**existence of requirement for participants to sign
their names**

existence of limits on amount of posts

the content analysis

(possibility for) interactivity

- ability to join listserves
- links to newsgroups
- links to chatrooms/discussion boards
- ability for user to sign & distribute email activism
- ability to join group

exposure to alternatives

- discussion about opposing groups/causes in org. text
- discussion about supporting groups/causes in org. text
- links to sites of opposing groups/causes
- links to supporting groups/causes

context

- links to state and federal government officials
- links/information about news coverage

transparency

- presence of mission statement
- presence of operating budget
- search function on site

accessibility

- list of contacts(hi & low), their emails & their phone numbers
 - funding vs. participation
- contact information for local activist/organizer
- language option on site

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